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DEFINITION IN THE SPELLING RECITATION¹

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I. THREE WAYS OF DEFINING

Logical definition requires so full a knowledge that it can state (1) the proximate genus to which the notion signified by the word belongs, and (2) the distinguishing property, or quality, which will set it distinctly aside from all other members of that genus. Some illustrations will help to make the matter clear. For example, the notion *brittleness* is to be defined. The ending *-ness* indicates quality; the notion belongs to the genus quality. But that would, so far, mean the same as *hardness*, *lightness*, *happiness*, *paleness*, etc. So we must find the particular quality which sets aside *brittleness* from others of that genus; and putting the distinguishing quality after the proximate genus, we derive the definition, "Brittleness is the quality of being easily broken."

To define accurately, then, requires exact classification, which means broad information. It also requires a critical faculty, a nicety of discrimination, to include just the essential quality and to exclude all qualities that are not essential.

Obviously, you will say, it is an impossibility to get real definitions from school children; pupils in the lower grades, even those in the upper grades, have neither the wide information which gives them the ability to classify notions nor the critical discrimination which would enable them to know essential from non-essential qualities.

Yet this is not altogether true. Not all definition is scientific, nor is it always built after the logical pattern already examined. To begin with, children are not so poor, after all, in their ability to define, provided the notion to be defined is not foreign to their

¹This article leads the editor to suggest the desirability of a similar test in some school which does not emphasize the progressive use of logical definition.

experience or by its very nature difficult for anybody to define. Ask a child what *mansion* means, and he will probably say, "A big, fine house." Not so bad. But ask him if he means the city hall; he will say, "No, I mean a big, fine house to live in—a big, fine home." Such a definition should satisfy any sensible teacher.

Try the word *caravan*. One will say, "A lot of camels." "Is it a drove out loose in the desert?" "No; a line of camels loaded with goods." That is a pretty good definition too. Many examples like these will be quoted from actual exercises later in this paper.

Definitions of this kind, if they contain just the right thought, are the best of all. If a child repeats the words of the dictionary, it is possible he has the idea in mind; but when he gives an accurate definition in his own colloquial diction, the teacher knows that the actual picture has passed through the child's mind and that the definition is backed up by actual understanding. The native colloquial diction of the child is a thing that deserves encouragement, whereas it is often treated with contempt or at least indifference; and more often still the over-careful teacher takes pains to "correct" every phrase that the child naturally uses for the expression of an idea. By colloquial diction I do not mean the loose combination of vulgarism, slang, and idiom ordinarily thrown together into a sort of linguistic junk-heap by the dictionary-maker and called "colloquial." What is slangy, I should call slang; what is provincialism or solecism I should call by the respective term. The term colloquialism should be the name for the strong native English of conversation, of the familiar letter, and of the playground. It is the lusty idiom, the long-lived vernacular. It dates back beyond Chaucer, much of it; and it will flourish—not only among the children and the unlearned, but among those who talk with vigor, with native freedom and unstudied directness—long after the sturdy old rhetorics are moth-eaten, long after some prim, lexiconed preceptors have closed their serious and musty labors.

The teacher's duty, therefore, is not to reprove the child's colloquial language as s'ovenly or ignorant, but to accept it as correct and honest, a foundation for a broader and more elegant

and sonorous vocabulary. Not only would such an attitude cause the English language of the schoolroom to be less foreign and repugnant, but a most useful avenue would therein be found for the reception of new ideas in all studies of the school course.

There is yet another means of definition with which the young student is almost equally ready; also it is a favorite and doubtless an indispensable method that the dictionary writer has of making clear the meaning of the word he is defining. This is by the use of synonyms. One of the commonest devices for presenting a thought that is new to the mind is by comparison. The whole content may be so unfamiliar that to attempt the standard method of classification and limitation by means of the logical definition may be quite useless. Of what use would it be to an Eskimo to tell him the class to which an orange belongs, and the difference between an apple and an orange? But if a snowball be used to illustrate the size of the fruit and the taste of some confection brought by the visitor be cited to convey an idea of the flavor, a conception will dawn in the mind which may be enlightened later into sufficient understanding.

Just so with words. Turn at random in the dictionary and see to what extent synonyms are used in defining: for example, *gratify*, "to please, to indulge, to humor, to requite, to recompense"; *recess*, "a withdrawing, retirement, intermission, an alcove, a niche." Hence, if a word that is new to a child be identified with a familiar one by means of a synonym, he at once appropriates the new word.

Identification by means of synonyms is obviously not the same process as logical definition. It is not a mental process of so high an order as that. Whereas logical definition places a notion in its proximate genus and selects from its qualities that which differentiates it from other members of that genus, the use of a synonym indicates that the general implication of the word is comprehended sufficiently well to recognize that two or more notions roughly or accurately cover the same ground. Thus they are taken as wholes and compared as wholes.

Consequently we may expect children in the lower grades to use synonyms freely in their definitions. The logical definition is

beyond the powers of most of them; the colloquial definition may not be attainable on account of inability to trim between even familiar notions; but the vaguest hold that one has on a word will make it possible for him to offer a word that he regards as of similar meaning and therefore identical—a synonym of it.

In these two methods, colloquial definition and use of synonyms, the teacher has the most direct approach to the minds of pupils. A new word, *purlain*, occurs in the lesson. It is utterly unfamiliar. The teacher says, "It means to take what doesn't belong to you; to steal"; and no dictionary will ever make the idea plainer than that.

By these two methods, young children who have not yet learned to draw fine distinctions may express their understanding of words. At the beginning of practice in definition, say in the 4-B grade, the attempts are of course awkward; but they are in the right direction, since they are endeavors to give expression to a shadowy idea.

To illustrate these attempts, and to show the processes of mind natural to a child at this age when he is attempting to appropriate and reproduce a dictionary definition, we select the words *station*, *caution*, *patience*, *familiar*, and *terror* from a lesson. After taking the suggestions of his teacher, the child goes to his dictionary and stores away (he thinks he does) the definitions. In recitation they appear about thus:

1. "A *station* is where people get on the train."
2. "*Caution* means to look out, to take care."
3. "*Patience* is being quiet, not fussing."
4. "*Familiar* means what you know right well."
5. "*Terror* is when you are scared a whole lot."

In 1, there is no genus, only partial description; in 2, a noun is defined as a verb; in 3, clear knowledge is indicated, even if only partly expressed; in 4, an adjective is defined as a noun; in 5, an abstract noun lacks the genus, and the specific difference is quaintly worded. Yet I do not hesitate to say that, as 4-B definitions, these are good enough, every one; the essentials of each idea are evidently grasped. A pupil of this grade is not expected to know the parts of speech. The means by which he

got the substance of these five words into his mind was the vehicle of colloquial, free definition or fairly good synonyms.

Of course, these two methods must give way gradually to more mature and accurate methods. How this is to be done, how in some general way and at indefinite periods some progress is to be made, will appear from the tests detailed below. But a necessary caution to teachers just here is that perfect definitions must not be expected of children until they are far along in the course of study.

II. A TEST AND ITS RESULTS

From the regular textbook, one hundred words were selected out of the assignment for the respective school year, and these were handed to the teachers of fourth-year, fifth-year, and sixth-year pupils. The words had been studied in the dictionary some weeks before, and had been used in sentences in class. Given as a test thus, without warning, the words were defined naturally, with no possibility of an artificial recitation from memory in terms that might not be understood. Given to one large school only, it was assured that children of much the same environments should define all the words. In all, about six thousand definitions were tabulated so as to assign each to one of the three methods discussed in the preceding pages.

Grade	Colloquial Definition	Synonyms	Logical Definition
	Per cent.	Per cent.	Per cent.
4-B.....	89.5	1.5	9
4-B.....	82.2	3.5	14.3
4-A.....	73.7	15.3	11
4-A.....	51	43	6
5-B.....	71	24	5
5-B.....	42	43	15
5-A.....	80	15	5
5-A.....	39	16	45
6-B.....	35	35	30
6-B.....	17	21	62
6-A.....	21	5.5	73.5
6-A.....	16	14	70

Allowing for difference in quality among the teachers, the table shows a striking progression, almost regular, in working

away from the less scholarly up toward the more scholarly methods of defining words.

Interesting examples of colloquial definition will be quoted to show how satisfactory these may be:

Fourth Grade

Iceberg: "a big piece of ice in the cold ocean"; "frozen water floating down a stream."

Sausage: "ground meat that comes from a pig."

Machinery: "lots of work"; "steel stuff to thrash corn and wheat."

Strait: "a small body of water that goes like a gate."

Pineapple: "a plant that grows in the ground with its head out."

Caravan: "a drove of men on camels on the desert."

Mechanic: "a man that fixes things."

Patient: "a doctor's sick person"; "one you wait on"; "to wait long and be still"; "to be quiet and take things as they come."

Patience: "to wait and not to grumble"; "what it takes to train fleas."

Bashful: "ashamed to talk"; "scared to come out"; "if some one would ask you to say a piece and you would not and you would cry and be so fretful."

Speechless: "a person who has been told something dreadful and hardly can stand it."

Dumb: "is when you can't talk; speechless is when you are too frightened to speak."

Fifth Grade

Wisdom: "You know a lot."

Vision: "something that you see at night"; "something seen in a dream."

Mosquito: "a long slender fly that has a long bill"; "an insect that flies around at night and bites."

Butterfly: "a fly that has slick dust on its wing."

Perseverance: "sticking to a thing"; "not to stop till you win."

Examples of synonyms and logical definitions are not quoted, for the reason that these are in dictionary language and would not be in any way unusual.

III. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Definition does not consist in memorizing and reciting ponderous phrases from the dictionary. These may be utterly foreign to the child's mind. He may deceive himself by learning mere forms; he may deceive his teacher thereby; but certain it is that mere memorizing is not definition.

If what he gets is a definition, it must be so expressed as to

tie the new word to something in the child's conscious experience. If it happen to be a synonym, it must identify the new term with some well-known term which is part of his ready language and his actual knowledge. That which he takes in as a definition, if really a definition, must be current coin receivable by him at full face value.

2. In the tabulation by grades above, observe—

a) That the colloquial definitions decrease in almost a regular way from about nine-tenths of the whole in the 4-B Grade to about one-sixth of the whole in the 6-A Grade.

b) That the logical definitions increase almost as rapidly as colloquial definitions decrease, from about one-tenth of the whole in 4-B to nearly three-fourths in the 6-A.

c) That the number of synonyms varies according to the nature of the words to be defined, but that more of them are used about the middle of the course. Probably this is because few synonyms are attainable in the Fourth Grade, and they are not greatly needed in the Sixth, since by that time pupils are able to use logical definitions freely.

3. Do not refuse to recognize the value of colloquial English in definition. At some stages in the child's education, the colloquial idiom is particularly useful as a vehicle for taking in as well as giving out ideas. As shown in the examples quoted, these definitions are frequently accurate, sometimes remarkably incisive, remarkably direct and complete. In other cases they are very loose: they define a noun as a verb, an adjective as an adverb; they place the notion in almost any large group not proximate; they may present on'y a familiar phase or example instead of a definition. In the lower grades colloquial definitions are not only unavoidable but acceptable. In the Fifth Grade they should be taken sparingly; and above that grade they should be set aside as rapidly as possible in favor of logical definitions, since herein is a more extensive, more elegant, and more accurate vocabulary.

4. When synonyms are allowed as definitions, the teacher should be certain that the synonym offered is better understood than the word to be defined. For example, for the word *curiosity*, the pupil should not give the synonym "inquisitiveness"; for *revive*, "reanimate"; for *fascinate*, "captivate"; for *caution*,

“wariness” or “admonition.” In none of these instances is there evidence that the child has gained a new thought.

5. As to the progress of definition from grade to grade, only general suggestions may be given, for much depends upon the nature of the words in each lesson.

In the Third and Fourth Grades, few exact definitions should be expected. Not only does the pupil lack ability to classify and discriminate so as to form logical definitions, except perhaps those of terms in arithmetic, geography, etc. which he has fully learned; he lacks also the *vocabulary* for expressing nice shades of thought, and his stock of useful synonyms is limited. Hence most children have to fall back upon colloquial, loose definition.

In the Fifth Grade, much the same condition prevails. The pupils have perhaps improved in their ability to handle the dictionary, so that one-third or more of the words should be accurately defined. Also more synonyms have been gathered, and a large percentage of these will be used.

In the Sixth and Seventh Grades, attention should be paid to correct parts of speech in the definitions chosen. For example, pupils in these grades should not be allowed to say, “*Jocose* means to be jolly,” or “*Census* means to count all the people.”

In these grades should be emphasized another matter which is too commonly neglected. Children usually suppose that the purpose of the dictionary is to give the pronunciation of a word, its derivation, then its various meanings—that is all. This idea accounts for a large number of errors to be found in the written work of pupils in high schools as well as in grammar schools—such sentences as, “The girl will *unfurl* the package of candy”; or, “The man fell down and hurt his canopy” (“covering over the head”); or, “The apple was *precocious*” (“maturing early”). Actual school sentences these are. The *application* of words, as well as their meanings, must be learned, and in the Sixth and Seventh Grades much of this work may be done. In assigning the lesson, the teacher may point out beforehand some words that will be troublesome, and warn the pupils to find in the “big dictionary” illustrative sentences that will show the one or more applications.

Furthermore, when synonyms are chosen for definition, they should now fit closely the word to be defined. For example, "robber" would not do as a synonym of *pirate*; nor should "controversy" be accepted as an exact equivalent of *wrangle*.

The Eighth Grade should give more attention to etymology and word analysis. Students in this grade should learn that the derivation of the word and the present meaning are not necessarily the same: *circumscribe* must not be defined as "to draw around," nor *philology* as "love of words."

Pupils in this grade ought to be able to define and use in their current sense certain less common newspaper terms, such as *ultramatum*, *cuisine*, *expansion*, *reciprocity*, *optimist*, etc. Merely to give a general idea of their sense is no test of skill in definition.

In all this work, the necessity for free oral discussion in the class cannot be over-emphasized. In no other way can teachers expect their classes to conquer the many linguistic problems.

6. One who has had much experience with the struggles of children with definition cannot forbear a word of regret that a simple dictionary for children does not appear to exist. The smaller the volume, the more condensed and consequently more general and colorless, are the definitions. Great progress has been made in almost all other lines in elementary school work, but the pupil in the lower grades confronts all the difficult puzzles that his grandfather did—he is dazed by the ponderous roll of words if he finds a definition in full, or he is cheerfully bethumped with synonyms most foreign and incomprehensible.

It may be replied that only fairly mature minds are able to grasp definitions, which must of necessity be abstract and fully expressed—therefore they cannot well be simple. But children from Fourth Grade up must search for the meaning of words, and it does seem that a consistent attempt to use simple language in the smaller dictionaries might be successful. If perhaps five thousand to eight thousand words of the ordinary grammar school vocabulary were made into a volume, the more usual meanings of these given in simple language, and brief illustrative sentences added to help the child, the whole matter of definition might be removed from danger of the slough of despond.